

Obituary

JOHN W. PARHAM, 1929-2002



John Willoughby Parham, the eldest child of Bayard Eugene Vincent and Dorothy Alice Parham was born in Christchurch, New Zealand, on 30th March 1929. In 1933, the family, now including a sister, Elizabeth, moved to Fiji, largely because of the depression but also because John's grandparents had moved there in 1919 to try to establish a coconut plantation. John's father was appointed Plant Pathologist, Mycologist and Agricultural Officer in the Fiji Department of Agriculture, and stationed at Nadururloulou, a Government 'station' about 17 miles from Suva. Because of poor roads and the necessity to cross a major river on a ferry, John and Elizabeth were taught by correspondence by their mother until the end of Form 1. It was, in his own words, a wonderful childhood, even though it was often a struggle for his parents who had to cope with low depression salaries, poor roads, tank water, no

electricity and wood stoves. John then attended the Suva Boys Grammar School as a boarder until the end of his first year, 1941, when the war with Japan meant all the schools were closed. It was decided to send John and sister Elizabeth to boarding school in New Zealand, whilst youngest brother, Peter, remained in Fiji. John was enrolled at the Christchurch Boys High School in 1943. Neither he nor his sister were to see their parents for several years, but they were wonderfully supported by grandparents and the many relatives and friends of their parents then living in New Zealand. These close ties were nurtured throughout John's life.

In 1948, having completed his schooling, John returned to Fiji and joined the Department of Agriculture as a laboratory assistant at the princely salary of £10 per month. He was awarded a Colonial Development and Welfare

Scheme Scholarship and was able to enrol at Auckland University College, University of New Zealand. He later moved to Canterbury University College in Christchurch where he completed his BSc degree before returning to Fiji. In 1953, he was appointed Assistant Botanist in charge of the Fiji Herbarium, but with no one to assist. Eventually he became Senior Botanist, but with no one to be senior over. They were busy, often challenging, but always interesting years, with many varied jobs involving botany, plant introductions, plant quarantine and, sometimes, supervision of cocoa and other research stations. These experiences stood him in good stead for later life where he proved to be very understanding of the problems and challenges of working almost alone with very few resources. Fiji was the country he loved, and the anecdotes from these years that he related in later life to younger colleagues sounded like the stuff of a Somerset Maugham tale. Fiji represents the most enjoyed part of his career.



John Parham at work in the Suva Herbarium in 1967 (with Albert Smith, left, and Dominiko Koroiveibau).

In 1964, John married Margaret Elizabeth Bull, of Dreketi, Vanua Levu, the second biggest island in the Fiji Group. Margaret's parents owned and operated a coconut plantation and timber mill. With her brothers, she had also been taught by their mother and led an idyllic life on the plantation. John and Margaret built a house in the forest at Colo-i-Suva, about eight miles

from Suva, a place they greatly loved. Their son and only child, David, was born in 1966.

Botany was very much a part of John's life and heritage. His grandmother, Helena Beatrice Richenda Parham had developed a keen interest in the indigenous flora of Fiji and was the author of numerous publications including *Fiji Native Plants, with their Medicinal and other Uses* (published in 1943). His father was also the author of numerous botanical papers including *Fijian Plant Names* (published in 1942); during his tenure as Director of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries in Samoa from 1956 to 1964, he had also written the key volume *Plants of Samoa* (published in 1972). John's uncle, Wilfred Laurier Parham likewise collected and studied the Fiji flora and published numerous papers.

Under John's tenure as Government Botanist in Suva, the Fiji Herbarium was greatly expanded to become a major repository of plants of Fiji and other islands in Polynesia and Melanesia. Fiji was the cross-roads of the Pacific, and John developed many contacts and friendships with the botanists that came to visit. A special friend and collaborator was Albert C. Smith, author of *Flora Vitiensis Nova*, who specifically acknowledges John's encouragement and advice, and for the preparations of the chapter on the Poaceae in the first volume of this major work. John's own publications were many and varied. His interests ranged across many topics, with special emphasis on grasses, weeds and cultivated plants. His greatest published work is his *Plants of the Fiji Islands* (published in 1964 and revised in 1972), an annotated checklist enhanced by several colour plates painted by Margaret, herself an accomplished botanical artist. This monumental work involved consulting widely with authorities on the Pacific flora throughout the world, as well as personal visits to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC, University of California and the New York Botanic Garden, U.S.A., the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, London, the Bishop Museum, Hawaii, and the Singapore Botanic Gardens. His work took him on other long trips as well, including a six month commission as Plant

Introduction and Exploration Officer to carry out surveys on coconuts and bread fruit in New Guinea, New Hebrides, Tonga, Samoa and other islands.

Independence for Fiji was granted in October 1970. In 1971, John was awarded the Fiji Independence Medal for those who have 'rendered outstanding public service to the country' and to 'mark the great constitutional change which will result in the Independence of Fiji'. However, it had been clear for some time that life would not be easy or straightforward for the old Colonial Service, and after much agonising, John and Margaret determined to leave. After a 'reconnaissance' trip to New Zealand and Australia, they chose to move to Brisbane in December 1970. It took a long time to be rid of the feeling that they were 'displaced persons' but time and their great appreciation of being so warmly accepted soon removed the feeling of isolation from 'home'. In the end John would remark that he was more 'Australian' than many Australians.

John commenced work at the Queensland Herbarium in early 1971 where he undertook a range of curatorial and administrative responsibilities in the herbarium and library. He also supervised the HERBRECS Project, the initial attempt to computerise the herbarium specimen labels. He remained in this position until 1975 when he accepted an offer to spend a year in Tasmania, preparing a report on the plant collections and making recommendations for the establishment of a State Herbarium. The project was sponsored by the Trustees of the Royal Tasmanian Botanical Gardens and funded by the Australian Biological Resources Study. John thus became effectively the first Curator of what, at his recommendation, became the Tasmanian Herbarium; no doubt his experiences of working alone in Fiji stood him in good stead for this challenge. With Margaret's help, John curated the thousands of long-neglected specimens and instigated the protocols and procedures largely still in place today. He also familiarised himself with the local 'tribal politics', and it was at his recommendation that custodianship of the collection passed to the Trustees of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. Though

many of his other recommendations were never adopted, at least some of the success and security enjoyed today by the Tasmanian Herbarium is due to John's pioneering painstaking efforts.

At the end of 1976, the Parhams returned to Queensland where they lived at Mount Tamborine in the Gold Coast hinterland and spent the next few years growing avocados, roses and other cut flowers. These were very happy years in a beautiful part of Australia but, in 1986, the family moved back to Brisbane. Margaret and John worked as Honorary Research Associates at the Queensland Museum and, in due course, John returned to the Queensland Herbarium as an Honorary Research Associate. He worked on the exotic collection which included old plant 'friends' from Fiji. He greatly enjoyed the detective work necessary to try and bring the old plant names up-to-date.

After David settled in Tasmania, John and Margaret became regular visitors every summer, never failing to renew their close friendship with Winifred Curtis and Dennis Morris, who were stalwart Honorary Botanists at the Tasmanian Herbarium, writing the *Students Flora of Tasmania*. In 1993, they moved permanently to Tasmania, settling in Sandy Bay in a comfortable house which afforded grand views of the Derwent Estuary and the passage of shipping to and from the Port of Hobart. Margaret was able to continue painting water colours with much encouragement from local artist friends, whereas John resumed work at the Tasmanian Herbarium as an Honorary staff member. Few institutions can boast having had someone so skilled offering their unpaid services. He greatly enjoyed this work, referring to his Monday session as 'it is really therapy but don't say so or the manager might get the idea to levy a charge'. They made many good friends in Hobart despite the fact that they were really 'foreigners'.

John loved a project, something to get his teeth into, and at length it was the algae collections that caught his fancy. Here were thousands of seaweeds- some beautiful, some valuable and none had been looked at for decades. They were loose in folders, sometimes

with barely legible handwritten labels or numbers. Most of his predecessors had avoided dealing with them for fear of destroying some long-forgotten order they may have been in. Surrounded by books, armed with labels, coloured pens to code the groups and the odd helper, he meticulously sorted the specimens into scientific groups and labelled and numbered them all. This was a task suited to his penchant for accuracy, detective work and order. Just as he thought it was finished, the Herbarium received a major donation of Southern Ocean seaweeds from phycologist Fiona Scott. The task began again, and John greatly appreciated having Fiona's assistance and company as they sorted through the extra several thousand specimens together. In between curation, John maintained his intense interest in the people he worked with, and his working day involved a pilgrimage around most desks and offices to catch up on the latest news. His experience of professional herbarium botany, people and life in general made him an excellent sounding board for ideas, mentor and confidante.



John Parham at work with the algae at the Tasmanian Herbarium in 2000 (assisted by Fiona Scott).

When confronted with failing health, John's love of order saw him prepare a meticulous account of his achievements with his algae project. His report catalogued all the specimens, the methods used to curate them and the references consulted. His recognition that his colleagues might not be quite as ordered

as he was meant that he left several copies of his report in different places so that no one absent-minded person would mislay it.

John died on September 27th, 2002, leaving his family and many friends and associates with the fondest of memories of a warm and friendly, gifted man with a great sense of humour and an intense love of life. As a botanist he also left behind a great legacy of his work and interest in the herbaria of Suva, Brisbane and Hobart, and of the colleagues with whom he worked. Generations of botanists in the future will consult the specimens he collected or curated and benefit greatly from the thousands of annotation slips, signed with John's humble hand, and the notes he left behind. Those who worked with him and knew him miss him greatly.

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Gintaras Kantvilas

Tasmanian Herbarium, Private Bag 4, Hobart, Tasmania 7001, Australia.